

Standard 6-4

The student will demonstrate an understanding of changing political, social, and economic cultures in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

6-4.1 Compare the features and major contributions of the African civilizations of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, including the influence of geography, long-distance trade, and Islam on their social, cultural, and economic development. (H, G, E)

Taxonomy Level: B 2 Understand/Conceptual Knowledge

Previous/future knowledge:

This is the first time students have been taught about the African civilizations of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

In 2nd grade, students summarized how nation-states interact with one another in order to conduct trade (2-4.2). Students will also summarize the concept of supply and demand and explained its effect on price (2-5.2) and identified the relationships between trade and resources both within and among communities (2-5.4).

In Global Studies, students will summarize the economic, geographic, and social influences of trans-Saharan trade on Africa, including education and the growth of cities (GS-2-3).

It is essential for students to know:

The names and approximate locations of the major ecological and climate zones of West Africa and the adjacent part of North Africa. These zones, from north to south, are: (1) Mediterranean; (2) Sahel (which means “shore” in Arabic, in this case the “shore” of the great Saharan desert); (3) Desert (the Sahara); (4) Sahel (the southern “shore” of the desert); (5) Savanna or grasslands; (6) Forest (tropical rainforest). These zones follow a very regular east-west pattern, across the entire area, and there are no major mountain ranges or other geographical features that cut across these zones, with one significant if partial exception. That exception is the Niger River, a major artery of trade that flows through forest, savanna, and Sahel, nearly reaching the Sahara.

Within this context, students should be able to identify and locate on a map of early West Africa (1) each of these major ecological zones, (2) the Niger River, and (3) the approximate boundaries of the three great kingdoms. Students should know that these locations gave the kingdoms access to large supplies of highly desirable resources or commodities, and they should know what those resources were and in which ecological zones they were located. They should then be able to explain how this localized production was combined with a demand for the most valuable of these resources that was diffused across zones, stimulating a long-distance trade that generated great wealth for the early kingdoms of Ghana, then Mali, and then Songhai. Students should also know where the most important of the trade routes for these goods began and ended, and the economic, social, and cultural impact of this trade on the three kingdoms. Finally it is important to know how closely tied this trade was to Islam and how Islam influenced government, education, and architecture of these three kingdoms.

Mediterranean North Africa provided cloth, spices, and weapons for trans-Saharan trade. The major resource of the desert was highly valued rock salt, necessary for human health and suitable for transport south into the savanna and forest zones. During the period of the three great early West African kingdoms, salt was often traded on a nearly equal basis for an equivalent quantity of gold, which came from two major West African goldfields (which students should be able to locate on an early West Africa map). These were the Bambuk-Bure goldfields in the western savanna in the present-day country of Mali and the Akan goldfields stretching from the southern savanna into the forest in modern-day Ghana. This gold was the West African resource most highly valued, both locally and internationally. For over 500 years, West Africa was the major source of the world's gold, underpinning the currencies of both the Mediterranean and Arab worlds, as well as the power and wealth of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. Other valuable resources of the savanna, traded mostly regionally, were grain (including rice from the inland delta of the Niger River), cattle (providing milk, meat, hides, and transport), donkeys (transport), and cotton. Finally, in addition to gold the forest zone also provided kola nuts, widely used by Muslims – who mostly lived outside the forests – as a mild stimulant acceptable to the Islamic faith (unlike alcohol).

The fact that demand for the most valuable of these resources – most importantly gold from the savanna and forest zones and salt from the desert – was diffused across zones (and beyond) led to long-distance trade to meet that demand. Such trade had to be carried out using transport appropriate to different environments. Trade across the desert zone required the use of camels, introduced to northwest Africa by the 4th century A.D. While suited (even essential) for transport and travel across the desert sands, camels were not able to function in the slippery mud of the rainy-season savanna. Trade across the savanna zone was thus conducted by pack animals, such as cattle and donkeys, suited to that environment. The prevalence of the tsetse fly in the forest zone, which was deadly for domestic animals, meant that forest zone trade had to be carried by river and/or human porters.

Not surprisingly, it was often at the lines of transition from one ecological zone to another, where modes of transport needed to be switched, that some of the earliest markets, and then towns and cities grew up. These market towns and cities – and others that followed – became sites where merchants from different cultures and environments met and exchanged not only goods but ideas, connecting early West Africa with the wider world in the process. Some of these towns and cities also became places where rulers set up their courts and governments.

Indeed, controlling such centers of commerce and taxing the region's lucrative trade that occurred there was crucial to the existence and maintenance of each of the three early West African kingdoms and their rulers (supported by a typically abundant grain-based agriculture produced by the majority of the kingdom's populace who were peasant farmers). In Ghana, the most important of those cities, located near the Sahel transition from savanna to desert, was Kumbi-Saleh, which became the kingdom's capital. For both Mali and Songhai, the most important trade centers were Timbuktu and Gao, located along the northern portion of the Niger River (east of Kumbi-Saleh but also along the transition from savanna to desert). The major long-distance trade routes ran primarily north-south, from the Bambuk-Bure and Akan goldfields in the south, through major trade centers such as Kumbi-Saleh, Timbuktu, and Gao, and then across the desert, mainly to Morocco.

Numerous Arabic-language sources indicate that the resultant wealth from agriculture and long-distance trade was sufficient for each dominant kingdom in turn to support an ever more elaborate court, large and complex hierarchy of government officials, large and powerful army, and rich and cosmopolitan urban culture (both Muslim and non-Muslim).

The trade was always linked closely with Islam. Goods were carried north and south across the desert by Muslim desert dwellers called Berbers, and rather quickly the main West African group that came to specialize in long-distance trade (called Wangara or Dyula) also adopted Islam. Over time, other wealthy and powerful West Africans, especially those in towns and cities, became Muslims as well, including the rulers of Ghana during its later years of dominance and all those of Mali and Songhai at their peaks of power.

It is important to emphasize in this regard that Islam's spread into sub-Saharan West Africa during this period (and mostly later as well) does not fit Western stereotypes that emphasize the spread of Islam through invasion or other forced conversion. Instead, Islam spread in West Africa through peaceful means, as many individual West Africans chose to become Muslim, for a variety of reasons. These included: (1) the accessible and straight-forward nature of Islam's basic theology; (2) Islam's association, as a "religion of the book," with literacy; (3) Islam's association with lucrative long-distance trade; (4) its related, more general association with wealth and power; and (5) the opportunity that becoming a Muslim gave to join a vast cultural as well as religious community that extended far beyond any individual's village or clan or ethnic group.

Even though such attractions led increasing numbers of West Africans to become Muslims from the 8th-16th centuries, Islam remained a mainly elite, urban religion during this time. Most of the vast majority of rural farmers and herders of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai continued to follow local, African religions. Still, the influence of Islam in trade, government, and in education and architecture in the major cities was great. One city in particular, Timbuktu, became a leading center of Islamic scholarship and intellectual life.

Early in 1591, Morocco staged a surprise invasion of Songhai in an attempt to take over the southern end of the trans-Saharan gold trade. A disciplined, elite force of 4,000 Moroccan soldiers with up-to-date firearms quickly defeated the Songhai army. After some immediate, short-term economic gains, ongoing local resistance and logistical problems created by trying to control and administer territory so far away proved impossible for Morocco to overcome. Political control in savanna West Africa fragmented. The trans-Saharan gold trade, already increasingly diverted south to the Atlantic coast and European ships, dwindled. Towns and cities declined. No successor to Ghana, Mali, and Songhai would emerge, and more than 800 years of West African history – marked by a series of powerful, large-scale savanna kingdoms based on control of an immensely lucrative trans-Saharan gold trade – came to an end.

Over the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries, West Africa's international commerce would be dominated by another type of trade, one that was much more disruptive and destructive: the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

It is not essential for students to know the detailed histories of the three major empires, or the names of specific rulers.

Assessment guidelines: In order to measure understanding of the features and contributions of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, appropriate assessments will require the student to be able to **identify and locate** the basic ecological zones of West Africa, **name** the major resources associated with these zones, **explain** the cause-and-effect relationship between trade in these products and the economic prosperity of the three kingdoms, **summarize** the sequential rise and fall of these kingdoms, **identify** the ways in which Islam spread in the three kingdoms, and interpret Islam's influence. Students should also be able to **compare** the features and major contributions of the West African civilizations of Ghana (at its height from the 8th-12th centuries A.D.), Mali (dominant from c. 1235-1470), and Songhai (dominant from c. 1470-1591), including the influence of geography, long-distance trade, and Islam on their social, cultural, and economic development.